Challenges in Teaching Russian Students to Speak English

Irina Abramova, Anastasia Ananyina, Elena Shishmolina*

Foreign Languages for Students of Humanities, PetSU, Petrozavodsk, Russia
*Corresponding author: elena.shishmolina@yandex.ru

Received December 29, 2012; Revised March 19, 2013; Accepted April 06, 2013

Abstract This paper addresses the challenges brought about by the fact that the English language in modern Russia is mostly taught by non-native English speakers in the context of classic ‘teacher-textbook-student’ paradigm. It also highlights the significance of shifting from this teacher-centered approach to EFL teaching and learning process, and presents the results of a teaching experiment aimed at creating a student-centered environment in a language classroom. We suggested that presenting the results of students’ research projects in the form of English-language video films can be an effective means of expanding students’ learning opportunities and eliminating some weaknesses of the artificial language learning environment. After five-year observations over more than 300 students learning EFL at the Petrozavodsk State University (PetrSU) and 20 non-native English-speaking teachers of the same University, we conducted a teaching experiment, which involved 22 students of the History Department and 28 students of the Law Department and resulted in creating two video films on professionally oriented topics chosen by the students and aligned with their fields of study. Our study revealed that students’ filmmaking is an effective tool to support not only such traditional methods as computer-based learning, presentation, research, but also such innovative kinds of work as multimedia or animated presentations. Therefore, making videos in a foreign language proves to be a highly productive way of acquiring English language skills through the use of technology.

Keywords: non-native-English-speaking teachers, teacher-centered teaching, student-centered teaching

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural contact, communication and interdependence have become integral parts of today’s world, opening great possibilities for speakers of languages commonly acknowledged as lingua francas. English has been granted the status of ‘global language’ used for international mediation over the past several decades. Approximately 400 million people speak English as their first language, and estimates of non-native English-speakers vary from 470 million to more than a billion, depending upon the definition of literacy or language competence. Recent studies confirm that «English learners are increasing in number and decreasing in age», and the growing popularity of English in the world «has become one of the few enduring facts of global modern life» [1]. According to the Euronews television channel, in 2008, approximately 56% of Europeans were bilingual and 38% of them spoke English [2]. The Russian Kommersant-Vlast magazine stated that 98% of German physicists and 83% of German chemists publish their scientific works only in English [3]. Experts predict that by 2020, 30-35% of the Asian population (vs. today’s 8-10%) will use English daily. Another vivid example of the ever-increasing popularity of English in Asian countries is the coinage of the term ‘Native Speakers of Asian English’ [4].

Russia, however, is obviously lagging behind this global linguistic unification process. The Russian Census of 2010 [5] demonstrated that only 5.5% of Russia’s population speak English as a second language, which obviously excludes a great number of Russians from «communication of people presenting different cultures» [6]. This warrants the necessity to update and develop English language teaching strategies, enabling non-native speakers in Russia attain sufficient English language conversation skills to enter the expanding circle of the Kachru’s model [7].

In the English language teaching industry, which has recently become a global enterprise, the majority of teachers worldwide are non-native English speakers. It is little wonder, indeed, that over the past five decades the native English speaking teachers (NESTs) vs. non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) dichotomy has generated much consideration, controversy and discussion. The focus of this discussion has gradually shifted from seeing native speakers (NS) as the only reliable source of linguistic knowledge and competence to proposing such terms as «proficient language user» [8] or «expert speaker» [9], and finally concluding that non-native language speakers can acquire «intuition, grammar, spontaneity, creativity, pragmatic control, and interpreting quality of 'born' native speakers» [10].

Since the beginning of the XXI century, several studies have been conducted to assess the perception of NNESTs by their students, native speakers and themselves (Piller, 2002; Inbar-Lourie, 2005; Moussu, 2006). Other scholars
(Matsuda and Matsuda, 2001; Hornberger, 2010) concentrated on maximizing the strengths of NNESTs through cooperation with NESTs and mutual sharing of best educational practices. However, there is a lack of studies which focus on Russia’s specific characteristics of non-native English teaching and learning, as well as on drawbacks and limitations of English classrooms where monolingual Russian students are brought by mandatory public education curriculum, and where a teacher is faced with substantial lack of students’ motivation. Such a situation is typical for modern Russia’s universities; therefore, a more thorough insight into general academic context of teaching English as a foreign language to young adults in Russia is required.

While some important steps have been taken to improve English language learning in the Russian Federation, the evolution of the learning environment and the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered education are not rapid processes. Web-based teaching and learning methods and techniques are more and more often included into the curriculum, while the role of modern devices such as digital cameras and cell phone cameras seems to be underestimated. These gadgets are an integral part of many young people’s lives nowadays, and our observations suggest that they stimulate students’ productive communication skills, while the Internet is often perceived by them only as the source of information. However, research-based evidence that making video films in the ESL classrooms can motivate students, encourage and enable them to use English in a more natural way, and as a result enhance their English communication skills is very scarce. Our study takes a step towards assessing the effectiveness of students’ filmmaking as an English language learning tool.

2. Teaching EFL to Young Adults in Russia

Drastic shifts in the Russian educational paradigm, in particular, Russia joining Bologna process, show that the education system started to conform to the modern economic realities and market demands. According to current labor market trends, university degree holders (bachelors and masters) are expected to have not so much professional knowledge, but rather skills and competences which help them to carry out effective lifelong learning and professional training. Foreign language skills, in particular, enable Russian professionals to investigate the best approaches and practices of their foreign peers, as well as efficiently represent their own country on the foreign market. At the same time, Boris Zhelezov, the Head of the Academic Mobility Department (The Higher School of Economics), in his interview to RIA Novosty expressed his regard over the fact that the number of graduate and post-graduate students studying outside Russia is still scarce. Some of the reasons he gave included insufficient foreign language skills, in particular, EFL skills, and academic immaturity of Russian students. These factors often make our young people incapable of effective learning abroad, because they cannot participate in discussing academic and professional questions and fail to understand foreign lecturers, even during the first year of bachelor’s programs [11].

It should be noted that Russian EFL teachers also face many professional challenges, the main of them being the dominance of traditional teacher-centered methods in language classrooms. When a teacher is put at the center of the learning process, he or she serves as the main source of linguistic and cultural information for students, as well as their main linguistic role model. We have assumed that such approach not only limits students’ learning opportunities, but also puts additional strain on a teacher. In order to verify our assumptions we have made five-year observations over more than 500 students learning EFL at the Petrozavodsk State University (PetrSU) and 20 NNESTs of the PetrSU’s Chair of Foreign Languages for Students of Humanities. These observations involved audio and video recording of classroom discussions and role plays, which were then studied using various methods of data and error analysis [12,13].

Our findings revealed that teachers who were observed demonstrated a distinct Russian accent when speaking English, which correlated with their foreign language competence and working experience, and could not be completely eliminated. It explained why outside natural foreign language environment, teachers often fail to evaluate the degree of their accent due to objective reasons, such as lack of academic placement in foreign countries, limited communication with foreign peers, and strong influence of their native language. This accent is subsequently reproduced by the students, who in most of the cases see their EFL teacher as the only linguistic role model and put much credibility into them. This results in the paradoxical situation when teachers cannot reduce their students’ accent, since this is their own accent very accurately imitated by the students.

Besides, we noted that teachers who were observed behaved quite formally in a classroom, preferred using traditional textbooks, loaded their students with homework, and the atmosphere at their lessons was generally stressful enough to create communication barriers between students. All this encouraged us to seek new EFL teaching methods, so that we could mitigate the impact of NNESTs’ phonetic accent on students’ pronunciation, put student at the center of the learning process and create more convenient and healthy classroom environment.

3. Materials and Methods

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of students’ academic video projects in the process of teaching English as a foreign language, a trial was conducted over a period of two years, 2011-2012. Students of the History Department (n=22) and the Law Department (n=26) of the Petrozavodsk State University were enrolled in two research projects, which resulted in creating two video films: «History of World War II» and «Most Infamous Crimes of the 20th Century». Topics chosen for the video projects were professionally oriented and aligned with students’ fields of study (i.e., history or law).

The trial was based on the following premises:
1. creating academic video projects enables to create stable, flexible and healthy learning environment, which
mitigates the impact of NNESTs’ individual foreign pronunciation characteristics on students;

2. such projects help to improve achievement for each young adult learner, enhance diversity and motivation, and seize new opportunities through the use of new technologies.

Both projects had common design and were divided into similar stages, which were followed by participants in order to achieve set goals. Each project included the following steps:

1. pre-planning (i.e., developing film concept through such methods as brainstorming, free writing and research);
2. writing a script (including the description of settings and visuals, as well as revising and editing the script draft);
3. preparing a storyboard (i.e., developing sketches and layouts for every scene to be shot);
4. making a film (shooting multiple takes of each scene according to the preset shot list and filming schedule);
5. editing a film (putting shop pieces together with the help of a computer editing program and adding voiceovers, music, titles and relevant visual effects);
6. publishing the final product (i.e., burning a film to DVD or uploading it to one of the free Internet services in order to present it to the audience).

Videos were captured using digital handheld cameras and after that uploaded to the website of the PetrSU’s Chair of Foreign Languages for Students of Humanities so that other students and teachers could view them and leave some comments. Participating students received initial instructions and were provided with linguistic and technical support throughout the course of the project, if required. For projects to be more beneficial, teachers circulated detailed rules and requirements relevant to student-made videos, ensured control at every level of the project (including previewing every video before public presentation) and provided sufficient conditions for feedback. In order to reflect upon the effectiveness of the proposed learning method, students and teachers who were enrolled in two projects were asked to evaluate their willingness to perform this kind of work before the projects started and after they were finished.

Our study has revealed that students’ filmmaking, in fact, is a wonderful tool to support not only such traditional methods as computer-based learning, presentation, research, but also such innovative kinds of work as multimedia or animated presentations. Making videos in a foreign language stimulates active learning through all senses, and proves to be a highly productive way of acquiring English language skills through the use of technology. Moreover, it helps to teach students how to use foreign language skills for investigating into professional topics and related social or ethical issues, and then use appropriate language for presenting the results of their research. It should also be noted that videos created as class assignments can contribute effectively to both intra- and interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

4. Results

Both projects were successfully completed and the final products (i.e., students’ films) were presented to more that 150 other students and over 20 teachers of the Petrozavodsk State University through digital media or the Internet. The analysis of the presented films, as well as students’ and teachers’ self-evaluations showed that conducting research through filmmaking can be considered an effective and innovative teaching method.

This method proved to be beneficial for both students and teachers, since it improved the effectiveness of teaching process, raised students’ motivation and enabled them to develop the following cross-disciplinary competences:

1. ability to use appropriate vocabulary in speaking and writing for producing a film on the chosen topic;
2. sustainable conversation skills, including ability to endorse a conversation with multiple discourse participants;
3. ability to use different kinds of reading (skimming, scanning, intensive, extensive, etc.) and to extract specific information from large texts;
4. ability to analyze text structure (differentiate between paragraphs, identify topic sentences, determine the author’s opinion);
5. ability to independently create texts of different genres, topics and subjects, using description, narration, reasoning and argumentation depending upon the purpose of communication;
6. cross-cultural communication skills, developed by raising cultural awareness and the increase of linguistic and cultural knowledge;
7. ability to use foreign language skills for building a more tolerant attitude to culture, history and contemporary issues of foreign nations, understanding the importance of learning other languages and developing the willingness to use foreign language skills for cross-border and cross-cultural cooperation.

One critical element of student-centered learning through video filmmaking is effective assessment, when students themselves participate in the evaluation of their work. This means that students are involved in deciding how to demonstrate their learning and approving that chosen methods and techniques are efficient and enable to produce end-product according to the intended objectives. PetrSU’s Chair of Foreign Languages for Students of Humanities has conducted an experimental open-ended questions survey to get feedback from 48 students of History and Law Departments and 12 teachers of the Chair of Foreign Languages for Students of Humanities. Both students and teachers were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of video filmmaking for developing English oral communication skills before and after participating in such projects. The results are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

![Figure 1](image.png)  
**Figure 1.** Attitude and willingness of students to produce a video film as part of their English language learning projects before participating
language they learn, throughout the entire course of study. So, they generally get information about this non-native language and foreign language culture from their Russian-speaking teachers, who, in their turn, are strongly affected by their native (Russian) language and very often investigate foreign language culture indirectly, just like their students – through academic literature, textbooks and mass media.

2. When students learn a foreign language in the classroom, outside natural language environment, their native language dominates, and the second language acquisition becomes a result of learning process, which involves the mediation of the first language. This leads to language interference of contacting language systems in the speech of a bilingual person, heavy accent being the most prominent example.

3. In a classroom, foreign language oral communication is limited not only in terms of communication situations and topics diversity, but also in terms of the number of communication participants. As a general rule, foreign languages are taught in small academic groups (up to 10-12 persons), which are isolated not only from native language speakers, but also from other groups within the same educational institution. This results in discouraging students from polishing their language skills and developing communication competence, since their peers and the teacher are most likely to understand them regardless of words misuse, grammar mistakes and heavy accent.

4. In natural language environment, a foreign language is learned as an instrument of exchanging information between communication partners for specific practical purposes. By contrast, when a learner is artificially exposed to a second language, this language is acquired for its own sake, therefore, simple information exchange or professional communication with native speakers remains an elusive perspective for many students of non-linguistic degrees.

5. A foreign language, studied in isolation from native speakers, has a limited number of social functions, usually confined to discussing suggested topics in pairs of groups. In natural language environment, a non-native language is absorbed by a learner together with foreign culture, while in a classroom environment it is acquired as a formal code, detached from the culture it encompasses.

We, however, take an optimistic view of the above listed challenges, since our experiment has already shown that some of them can be eventually overcome by adopting a student-centered approach to the teaching and learning process. Therefore, we heartily encourage our colleagues to search for novel methods of creating an effective classroom environment for teaching foreign languages under different circumstances.

6. Conclusions

This paper reported on conducting students research projects aimed at creating academic video films for developing students’ foreign language communication competence. The results of the study show that this kind of projects, which can be easily implemented with the use of modern video-filming technologies and Internet capabilities, enables to develop sustainable, flexible and
healthy learning environment for students. It also enables students to improve their foreign language communication skills and evaluate their own achievements. Therefore, creating video films in a language classroom can be considered an innovative and highly effective method, which provide new opportunities for taking a student-centered approach to the foreign language teaching process. The main advantage of this method is that it not only enables students and teachers to attain some general educational and research goals, but also helps to mitigate a number of negative impacts associated with learning and teaching foreign language outside natural language environment. The benefits of creating video films while teaching and learning EFL can be summarized as follows:

1. this kind of work greatly increases motivation for learning foreign languages;
2. it builds the awareness and teaches the culture of written communication, as well as helps students to develop skills of functional and stylistic written speech differentiation;
3. it stimulates students’ group work, which in turn helps to develop sustainable polylogue conversation skills;
4. it creates a more natural foreign language communication environment, which can be re-designed during the film-making process;
5. it ensures better understanding of foreign language culture and, therefore, improves effectiveness of written and oral communication;
6. it reduces students’ anxiety and stress, which is an inevitable result of foreign language communication during traditional classroom activities and exams;
7. it develops the skills of using advanced ICTs, which form an integral part of each modern university graduate’s professional competence.

However, the main advantage of students creating video films in a foreign language classroom seems to be the opportunity to organize an individual learner-oriented studying process, taking into account and consciously making use of individual cognitive, emotional and personal characteristics of students and minimizing their drawbacks. In the context of individual-oriented education, it is «not the teaching process, but learners’ cognitive work that plays a leading role in teacher-student relations, while the classic ‘teacher-textbook-student’ paradigm is replaced by a new one – ‘student-textbook-teacher’» [16]. Teachers’ role and functions in the EFL teaching process also change: instead of being the only source of knowledge and the subject of control for students, they organize students’ individual cognitive activity, provide help, support and advice.

References